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THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

MADERA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

Volume VII - Number 3

July 1967



Left to Right: Wm. Sell, Helen Huffman, Galen Clark, Mrs. Wm. Sell, Edward Washburn, Mrs. J. H. Simonson, Wm. Sell, Jr. Taken in 1890 by Geo. Fiske, Yosemite.

WILLIAM MARTIN SELL, JR.

Autobiography and Reminiscences Related by Mr. Sell on a Tape Recording. Oct. 1965.
Arranged and Written by June English. May 1967.

My name is William Martin Sell, Jr. I was born in Merced in 1882. My father was born in Pennsylvania and came to California when he was three or four years old. Father's parents settled in Sonora where my grandfather had mining interests.

My mother, Etta Grace Hall, was born in the little town of Hornitos, Calif., and moved to Merced when she was a young lady and there met and, in 1881, married my father. My sister Eleanor who is fourteen years younger than I, and I, were their only children.

Father, with Mr. Henry Washburn of the Yosemite Stage and Turnpike Company, bought the Dennis Ranch in 1890. The Dennis Ranch was in a deep valley and my mother named it Ahwahnee. Ahwahnee was the original name of the Yosemite Valley and it means "deep valley." The Indians pronounced it "Ahwahnitchie."

Father passed away in 1932, mother in 1938. Their ashes are scattered on the hills at Halendee Apah. An interesting story is told about my mother in the book "Pioneers in Petticoats" by Shirley Sargent, 1966.

I attended school at Irvington, a military academy 15 miles north of San Jose. Later, I attended the University of California, class of 1907.

I started working for the Yosemite Stage and Turnpike Co. when I was eighteen years old. I worked during the summer months for five years. My first job for the company was to get 97 head of horses about 28 miles below Raymond and drive them to Wawona. Sam Owens worked with me. We picked them up and bought some horses from Miller and Lux at the Santa Rita Ranch, and drove them all to Wawona. We stopped at all the Stations and finally arrived at Wawona. The Company usually kept about 600 head of stock for the stages.

I started driving the stage in the summer of 1900 and it was a great responsibility. I drove a daily run. The stage left Raymond at seven in the morning and we would change horses at Depelos (Footman Ranch) at Grub Gulch and stop at Ahwahnee for lunch. The trip to Wawona took about ten hours. There the passengers would spend the night and with a new stage, team and driver, take the trip to Yosemite Valley. This would take another five and a half to six hours. On the way back the stages were routed through the Big Trees. The trip from Wawona to Raymond took eight and one half to nine hours, as it was downhill much of the way.

The Cannonball Stage was started about 1900 or 1901. It was the fastest scheduled stage in the west. The trip was seventy-two miles and they made it in twelve hours. Every day there was a stage leaving from each end, Raymond and Yosemite. The horses were changed about every seven or eight miles. Uphill and downhill the horses moved at a good trot. This stage continued until 1912 or 1913.

During the three summers I drove the stage I met many important people. I was fortunate in not being involved in any robbery but I will tell you of one that was probably

the most outstanding spectacle that ever happened concerning a robbery. I don't remember the month, but I do recall it happened about a mile and a half below Grub Gulch. One stage had been loaded at the Quarry with workmen to go up to the Big Trees and was on its way. An armed man with a barley sack over his head stepped into the road and motioned them to stop. He would not allow them to go on. While they were waiting two wagons, loaded with wood, came down the road and were stopped. Two soldiers, who were outriders for the cavalry that was on its way to Wawona were also stopped. The robber halted and robbed three stage loads of regular passengers and a mail wagon.

After getting the money from the people, the robber wouldn't let them go until two troops of cavalry who were on their way to Wawona to guard the Yosemite National Park had arrived. In those days the roads were dusty and the officers and their bugler rode a couple hundred yards ahead of the troops to keep out of the dust. The officers and the bugler came around the curve and the robber stopped them and told them to order the bugler to sound "halt." And he did. The robber told the people he would go back of this hill and if anyone came after him within four or five minutes he would have to kill them. Then he backed out of sight. The son of Major Babcock, who was the officer in charge of the troops, started after him. The robber put his gun on him and said he did not want to kill a youngster, but if he came after him, he would be killed. The officer ordered the bugler to sound for the troops to come on. They rode up and were issued ammunition. The soldiers were not allowed to have ammunition when traveling from San Francisco to Yosemite. The men would get drunk at night and go into and shoot up the towns. That is why it was necessary to issue the ammunition before they went over the hill in search of the robber.

They searched for several hours and found no trace of the robber but did find a barley sack. In the sack were a pair of army field glasses, a tin cup, some cartridges and a vest. A stamped photograph was found in the pocket of the vest. The civil officers came up and they could find no evidence either, other than the barley sack and its contents. They thought this



Wm. M. Sell, Senior

would give them a lead and after many months they located a laborer in Stockton who was the owner of the vest and photograph. He proved he was working on the day of the robbery. A day or so before the holdup, he had left his vest on a pile of lumber near where he was working and it had been stolen.

The robber had stopped seven vehicles at one time, plus the soldiers, who were the outriders for the troops, a major, two captains, two first lieutenants, two second lieutenants and two troops of cavalry. I don't think one stage robber ever held up so many people at one time. That was the outstanding robbery of our part of the country. They never did find the guilty man. Some suspected it was one of the soldiers, but no suspect was ever found.

Ahwahnee was our home until 1919, when the Ahwahnee Ranch, the old Dennis Ranch, was sold to the Tri-Counties and the Ahwahnee Sanitarium was established and still stands. We bought the Hill Ranch (later known as the Sell Ranch and Halendee Apah) about a mile from the original Ahwah-



Mrs. Wm. (Etta Grace) Sell
Daughter Eleanor (Mrs. George Crooks)

nee Ranch and we made our home there until 1956. The Sell Ranch was named "Halendee Apah," which means "belongs to me." The Indian name was "Apah." Literally translated, it means "my ranch, Apah."

When we first moved to Ahwahnee, we had only Indians work for us. The Indians were a very interesting and important part of my life. Then, there were many full-blooded Indians around us. They were good people, as good as anyone until the white man taught them to drink. The ones who drank did not amount to much.

The Jacobs family lived and worked on the Ranch for many years. Bessie Jacobs is still alive and lives in Madera with a younger brother named Lafayette (1965). Johnny Jacobs was a Tuolumne Indian whose mother was one of the original Indians who were moved out of the Yosemite by James Savage. Johnny's mother married a man named Jacobs and Johnny was the outcome of that marriage. He was a bright, very able and fine man. His wife Annie was a Chukchansie Indian. They had one daughter and five sons. Bennie, the older boy, and I were companions and playmates.

Because of our close association, I attended powwows, rodeos or what we may call the affairs the Indians have. I think "fandango" is a better word. I spent two or three days at a time living with them and eating their food. They danced, played their Indian games, gambled with their hand games and had horse races. The fandangoes continued as long as the food lasted.

About a mile from the Ahwahnee Sanitarium buildings was a Round House in which the fandangoes were held. I think the present one is the third Round House. At the same location is a large burying ground. The building was about thirty or forty feet in diameter with a hole in the center of the roof, as all the cooking was done in the Round House. Those who couldn't find a place to sleep in the Round House, slept outside.

I was a grown man and married and home for a visit when Mary, the mother of Johnny Jacobs, died at Chowchilla where the family was living. Johnny sent word to me and asked me to come over to the funeral, which I did. I want to tell this to show the good moral character of the Indians before they drank.

Johnny's house was small, with a front room and kitchen. The front room was about 18 by 18 feet. In that room, Johnny, his wife and daughter, who was a few years younger than I; Johnny Antone and his wife and daughter, who was quite a bit younger than I; Tilly Caster, about my age, and her daughter, and the five Jacobs boys and I, slept. We were all in this one room. Benny and I had a bed to ourselves. We went to bed without any consciousness of the others. We got up in the morning and dressed in the same way. No one noticed the others. This is a tribute to the Indians. I don't think the white people could live as we lived without any awareness of the others around us. It was simply a place to sleep.

All the friends come to an Indian funeral and chant. They call this a "cry." Usually there is an Indian appointed to care for the guests. At Mary's funeral, George Washington looked after the guests. The Jacobs family furnished the fundamentals

for the meals. For instance, Johnny had a half a beef, a sack of beans, a sack of flour, coffee, bacon, sugar and some lard. The Indians usually used lard. The food was for the guests who came to "cry." After I got there, all the family sat on the front porch and watched the visitors arrive. They paid no attention to us but we gossiped about them. We commented on their appearance, their health and the condition of their animals. It was just gossip. After all had arrived, about forty or fifty of them, George Washington came to the house and Johnny showed him the grub he had and George assigned some men to pack it away. That night, about eight or nine o'clock, they started to "cry." They kept it up all that night, the next day, and the following night. The next morning was the funeral.

In the early days, all the personal effects were buried with the body. Everything the person owned. The closest relative of the deceased was put down on top of the casket or box in the grave and was left to get out as best they could. I have seen an Indian take a couple of hours to get out of the grave. Symbolically, it meant they were now alone, on their own resources, and they had to look out for themselves. At Mary's funeral, they did not do that. They put her personal belongings in the grave but cut her baskets in half, as they did in most of the later burials. The baskets were cut in half because the white men came and dug up the graves for the baskets. Each Indian threw a little clod of earth on the grave. One Indian, who had been trained by the Catholics, crossed himself and said a prayer. I, as a very close friend of John's, was asked to say a few words.

The Indians then cried and the grave was covered. The "crying" continued and the family went home. After our supper, George came over to the house and took Johnny's hand and led him to a little creek and washed John's face. George told him his mother was gone and there was no use feeling badly. Mary had been a good Indian but now she was gone and now he must forget it and go on living as though nothing had happened. George did that to each member of the family. And when it was done the "crying" stopped. The next day they played games and gambled, including the family. When the food ran out, everyone went home.



AHWAHNEE TAVERN

Originally the Dennis Ranch, later named Ahwahnee, after the Sells bought it in 1890. Was the stage stop for many years, hence, Ahwahnee Tavern.

The main food of the Indians was acorn bread. The Indians preferred the Black Oak acorn. They gathered and dried them and then ground them in little round holes in rocks. You can find these holes in granite wherever there was an Indian camp. They ground the acorns with a rock and sifted it through a basket that was of a fine weave. Then it was put into a basket, water added, and hot rocks were dropped in to make it boil. They could reach into the basket and get out the hot rocks with a stick that was bent and had a loop at the end. They knocked the acorn meal off the rock with a finger and placed more heated rocks in the baskets. After the acorn meal was cooked it was put into a sand container, possibly three or four feet wide. The sand was leveled off and the walls were built up on the sides and the hot meal was poured in. While the meal was cooling off or drying on the sand they usually put cedar or fir boughs on it for seasoning. The only seasoning that was in it was from the boughs. They let it cool and then washed out the sand. Some of it they would mold into something that looked like a loaf of bread, place it in water and let it chill. The texture was quite different from the meal that was called "kopati." That was a liquid that

looked something like a custard. To me it had a very unpleasant taste but the Indians liked it. It was a highly prized food and today the Indians would rather have it than any other food.

Most of the Indians had little shacks, generally boards that were thrown together to give them some protection. Some had what we call tepees and they were made out of bark. The tepees were fairly rainproof and snug against the wind. They had holes in the center to let out the smoke when cooking. (This type of structure was used as a temporary shelter before the white men came. J. E.)

After I finished school, I worked in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the Washburn-Crosby Flour Mills for $1\frac{1}{2}$ years. Then I worked in British Columbia in the Fraser River Lumber Mills. In 1907, I came back to California and associated with my father in the operation of the first camp at El Portal, at the terminal of the Yosemite Valley Railroad, and later the El Portal Hotel. In 1908 my father built Camp Ahwahnee in Yosemite Valley. I operated Camp Ahwahnee until 1910 when I took over the concession and lease of the old Sentinel Hotel, Camp Lost Arrow and Hotel and Camp at Glacier Point.

These I operated until 1919 when the Desmond Park Service Company took over the concessions we had controlled in Yosemite. The Desmond Company failed and the Yosemite National Park Company was formed with Mr. T. E. Farrow as general manager. I became his assistant in operating the hotels. I personally operated the Yosemite Lodge. In 1921 I left Yosemite and operated the Mt. Tamalpais and Muir Woods Railroad, a short road that ran from Mill Valley to the top of Mt. Tamalpais, then into the Muir Woods National Monument and back to Mill Valley. In 1926, I was associated with Mr. T. E. Farrow in the operation of hotels. During the depression we operated many hotels for the creditors. Later, I operated the Wilson Restaurants and Stores for the creditors. Wilson's had ten restaurants in Northern California, one each in Vallejo, Stockton, Fresno, Palo Alto and three each in San Francisco and Oakland. After their liquidation, I returned to the ranch in 1938. I went into the cattle business and we raised Angus cattle and had a very happy experience with them.

Our ranch home was burned out and we built a new home and in 1956 we sold the Hill Ranch, later known as the Sell Ranch or "Halendee Apah." We later rented a home at Ahwahnee and then we bought a home which was burned out in the Harlow fire. It was with regret we sold the Sell Ranch but it was one of those things that became necessary because of my health.

During that time I was a director of the Madera County Chamber of Commerce. I was appointed by Governor Warren as Supervisor of District Four and served until 1952, when the condition of my health forced me to stop. I served five years on the Madera County Board of Education as its president. I have served on the Madera Juvenile Commission. As a Supervisor, I was a director of the California Supervisors Association. I headed their welfare committee for four years, as well as their health committee and the committee on finance. I was elected first vice president of the Association, but as I had stated before, I had to retire, so I did not have the privilege of serving as its president. I am a director of the Oakhurst Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Survey Committee on Mental Health.

I was first married in Merced to Etta Scott, who was born in Hornitos, the same little town in which my mother was born. Later, I married Theresa F. Fowle of Salem, Oregon. I met her while I was working in the lumber mills in British Columbia. Her father was superintendent of the mill when I was there. We have not been blessed with children. We now live at Redwood Creek, four miles above Oakhurst in a very lovely place.

* * * * *

The above story has been recorded in Mr. Sell's own words and typed from the tape recording by June English of Fresno, a member of the Madera County Historical Society.

Mr. Sell is a modest man and, of course, did not relate the many ways in which he has served Madera County.

We have been able to obtain from friends and from Mrs. Sell the following data which should add to his story:

After 1938 Mr. Sell was Director of Agricultural Adjustment Association; Chairman of the Mountain area for the Madera County Defense Organization; member of the Ration Board in charge of private car rations; Chairman of Madera County Red Cross for 2 years, and was given an Honorary Life Membership; and a member of the Madera County Board of Supervisors for 7 years, beginning in 1945. He was Chairman of the Board of Supervisors for 2 years.

For 5 years Mr. Sell was chairman of the Relief Committee of the California State Supervisors Association, a director for 5 years of the State Supervisors Association and was first vice-president when he retired.

He was a member of the Madera County School Reorganization Committee.

Mr. Sell was elected a member of the Madera County Board of Education and served as president for 5 years.

He was a member of the statewide committee on school finances, and served as president and director of the Madera County Farm Bureau.

Mr. Sell has been a member of the Madera County Chamber of Commerce, and is now a member of the Madera County Juvenile Commission; of the Advisory Committee of the County Welfare Department; a member and director of the Madera County Action Committee of the Office of Economic Opportunity; a member of the Madera Elks Lodge; and a member and director of the Golden Chain, Council of the Mother Lode Highway Association.

Mr. Sell received an Honorary Life Membership in the P. T. A.; and in the Oakhurst Chamber of Commerce.

He is a charter member of the Madera County Mental Health Association, and a member of the Advisory Committee on Mental Health for the County Board of Supervisors.

During and after the Harlow fire in 1961, Mr. Sell was chairman of the Advisory Board of the Red Cross Relief and the U. S. Small Business Administration aiding the area after the fire.

The California Elementary School Administrators Association, Central Section, presented Mr. Sell with the "Golden Apple" in 1966 for his many services to education.

From the long list of services that Mr. Sell has given to the county and his community we can see he is a useful citizen. Some of the reasons he has been selected to hold these various assignments are that he is truly interested, faithful, very able, loyal and always willing to help.

We have not mentioned Mrs. Sell especially in this narrative because it is the story of Mr. Sell but we must always keep in mind wherever there is an outstanding man, there is a good and faithful wife in the background.

Mr. and Mrs. Wm. Sell were chosen as King and Queen of the Old Timers Celebration for Madera County in 1966.

With this closing statement we end this autobiography of Mr. Wm. Sell and wish for both Mr. and Mrs. Sell, Jr. many more years of service and happiness in Madera County.



Mr. and Mrs. Wm. M. Sell, Jr. Today.

* * * * *

Digging in Buchanan!

A group of archeological students from San Francisco State College, headed by Tom King, are doing research in the Buchanan area and have created quite an interest there. The Madera Daily Tribune has published some very informative articles, plus some good photographs of the research being done.

This San Francisco group will be guests of the Society for the next quarterly meeting in August. Buchanan was once a lively little place. Much of that area will be under water when the proposed dam is completed. The research group has uncovered some interesting artifacts; these could become the property of Madera County if we can show that we have a place to display them.

Exhibits of the Society

In our exhibit space in the Government Center we have a very attractive display on mining in Madera County.

The display was arranged by Mrs. Ralph Spotts and a committee. Articles are from the collection of the Society, plus loans by Al LeGras of Ahwahnee, Mr. and Mrs. Will Ryan of O'Neals, Mrs. J. Wesley Smith, Guy Crow, Mrs. Emily Wogaman and Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Spotts, all of Madera. A new display will be set up after September 1st.

* * *

Here and There With Our Members

Have you noticed the fine articles recently in the Sierra Star by Allen Harder? He is a member of our Society and certainly knows a lot about locomotives. We are proud of him.

Healy Tondel of Fresno, a member of our group as well as Fresno, was elected Vice President of Region 8 of the Conference of California Historical Societies. Madera County is in Region 8. Other counties in it are Merced, Stanislaus and San Joaquin. Mr. and Mrs. Guy Crow and Healy Tondel attended the Conference at Oroville.

It was really old home week at our last quarterly meeting in June at Oakhurst when Mrs. Betty Wimer, a member, was our speaker. She is a descendant of the early Nichols family of Oakhurst and told her story well. She had an excellent collection of early photos.

* * *

Report on Membership

As this Historian goes to press, our total membership is now 371.

Our membership committee is composed of Mr. and Mrs. Hilloray Brown, and Mr. and Mrs. Ray Page. They in turn have secured chairmen in Chowchilla, Raymond, Oakhurst, North Fork and Madera. We will have a more complete report soon.

* * *

WHEN ? ? ?

This question was turned in. Can you answer it?

When was Gravelly Ford Canal started?

* * *

Madera County Will be 75 in '68!

Did you know that? We hope to publish an extra large edition of the Historian for the April issue. Why not let us know of interesting events that we should include?

* * *

Historians in Sets For Sale

We have our Historians arranged in sets that now include copies from 1961 through 1966 plus the last three issues of 1967, making a total of 27 copies. We must now charge \$3.00 per set in order to cover cost and postage. We have sold many sets since last October. We can also supply you with any single copies at 25¢ a copy, 1967 issues 50¢ a copy.

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THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

Managing Madera County Historical
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June English

THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN is published quarterly in January, April, July, and October by the Madera County Historical Society, P. O. Box 478, Madera, California, 93637. Subscription 50¢ per copy, \$2.00 per year, is included in membership in the Society. Please credit "The Madera County Historian" when reproducing any part.